FORMS AND SYMBOLS OF AMERICAN IDOLATRY

———————

A Project

Presented to

the Faculty of the

School of Theology at Claremont

———————

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

———————

by

Richard Lee McPherson

June 1975

This professional project, completed by

_____Richard Lee McPherson_____,

has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty
of the School of Theology at Claremont in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

Faculty Committee

_____

_____

June 3, 1975
Date

Dean

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

The church today is plagued with a loss of support and interest. People ask "Is God dead?" Whatever the response to this question is there is a growing feeling that the church is on the way out. The response of the church to this problem is often contradictory. On the one hand the conservative churches characteristically revert to traditional prescientific understandings of doctrine, cult, and life. They make a sharp distinction between the natural and supernatural. God is seen as a supernatural being who creates and controls all natural phenomena. However this conceptualization conceives of God as only an extension of the finite, even if God is the Supreme Being. Thus, it stands in direct contradiction to modern scientific understanding while still failing to provide an adequate concept of God's transcendence.

On the other hand, the liberal approach to this problem is characteristically to re-interpret religious symbols and messages to accomodate the modern situation. Religion is only functional if it meets the needs of the hour. The spiritual aspect of religion is lost to rationalization.

Both the style of the conservative and that of the liberal reduce God to finite conceptualizations and identify Him with finite causes. Religion is made to serve functions either by compartmentalization or by accommoda-

tion. According to Tillich, this is not acceptable because religion is seen not as a special function of man's spiritual life, but it is the dimension of depth in all functions. Finite ultimate concerns deny the possibility of man finding ultimate meaning, substance, judgement, and creative courage. Man becomes lost in his finitude and finite concerns. In radical monotheism ultimate concern transcends finite objects and concerns. The center of valuation is the center of being itself. Thus ultimate concern in this infinite center of Being is a centered act of the personality toward the ultimate ground of being. God is both the object and the subject of faith. In an idolatrous faith the finite center of value remains an abject of adoration for the faithful subject. Faith, as the centered act of personality, has as its centering point that which is on the periphery of the center of being. As such it leads to a loss of the center and a disruption of the personality. Idolatry is the self-destructive faith in finite centers of valuation which therefore denies the personality of the depth of existence.

With this understanding of idolatry this thesis will be concerned with two prevalent forms of idolatry in American culture. That is, the henotheism of civil religion and the polytheism of wealth and consumerism. Chapter II will deal with civil religion. Chapter IV will deal with consumerism. However, this thesis also has a special inter-

est in the role of the media in sustaining idolatry. So, Chapter IV will also be concerned with the role of the mass media. As preparation for the treatment of the media, Chapter III will be concerned with as investigation of sings and symbols. This will provide us with the theological tools with which to interpret the function of the media in modern idolatry. Chapter V will be a brief summary and the conclusions of this study.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. DEATH OF GOD?

Today, perhaps more than ever, the church is pressed to show
relevancy in the ancient symbols of her faith. Making the message of
the Judeo-Christian tradition relevant is not a new task for the
church, but it is increasingly important. Society has never been
static and therefore a "static theology" is of no use. According to
Paul Tillich, the task of theology is one of mediation. Any system of
theology must continually mediate between the "eternal criterion of
truth" as manifested in Jesus Christ and the ever changing experiences
and life of society.

> If the mediating task of theology is rejected, theology
> itself is rejected; for the term 'theo-logy' implies, as such,
> a mediation, namely between the mystery, which is the theos,
> and the understanding, which is the logos.[1]

If the task has not changed, the circumstances the church
finds herself in certainly have. In this day of what Alvin Toffler
calls "Future Shock," interest in religion in general and the Christian
faith in particular is declining. One only needs to cite statistics of
church membership and attendance to lend credence to this assertion.
Dean Kelley has charted this decline at least as far as the liberal,

---

[1]Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of
Chicago Press, 1948), p. ix.

1

mainline denominations such as United Methodist are concerned. In his
graph for the Methodist Church (exclusive of the A.M.E., A.M.E.Z., and
C.M.E.) he indicates a membership of approximately 10.66 million
people. By 1965 the membership increased to almost 11.5 million, but
by 1970 it decreased to about 10.7 million for a net gain of about
forty thousand people. During this ten-year period the population of
the United States increased by 1.4%.[2] If the church had held its own
in the percentage of Americans who belonged to it, the membership
would have increased in size to 14.924 million people for that ten-
year period. That would be a net increase of 4.264 million people.
The difference between four and a quarter million people and forty
thousand people is certainly enough to cause some amount of concern on
the part of those who, like myself, have an abiding interest and love
in the church.

Indeed this decline is no trivial matter. It raises a
fundamental question about the center of the Christian faith. That
center is God. The question is: Is God dead? Does the basic symbol
of the Christian faith have any relevance in modern Western culture?
According to Gabriel Vahanian the answer is yes, God is dead if by God
we refer to the biblical view of a wholly transcendent Creator of man
and creation. In echoing Nietzsche, Vahanian believes the protest of
today's society is directed at this very core of the Christian faith.
This is so because the symbols and concepts of culture and humanity of

[2]Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York:
Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 2ff.

the Christian faith are theocentric, while modern society is "impreg-nated by an atheistic and anthropocentric humanism."[3] Whereas Christianity is based on a radical monotheism, modern culture is based on a radical immanentism.

Tillich sees two main characteristics of modern Western man. The first characteristic is his concentration on "the methodical investigation and technical transformation of his world, including himself, and the consequent loss of the dimension of depth in his encounter with reality."[4] Reality is seen as only that which is temporal and finite. The transcendent other is rejected. The universe of finite beings are self-sufficient--not needful of a God in the transcendent sense. Man, as the most highly rational and logical creature is the master of the universe.

In order to fulfill our destiny as master of the universe persons must have the creative powers previously only attributed to God. Human finitude is ignored. Death and guilt no longer have an impact on humanity's conception of itself. Although one may have shortcomings, they are not seen in terms of original or universal sin. The demonic powers recognized by the Judeo-Christian faith are denied. Both the individual and the community are seen as progressively attaining perfection. The universe replaces God, persons replace the

---

[3]Gabriel Vahanian, *Death of God* (New York: Braziller, 1966), p. 186.

[4]Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 43f.

Christ, and the Kingdom of God is seen as Utopia--that place and time in history when humankind finally brings about justice and peace.[5] In view of this conception of humanity and reality Vahanian can say God is dead--He no longer is relevant in this culture. If the concept of a transcendent God is even understood, it is held to be dangerous to human self-understanding.

The issue raised in Kelley's book has to do with the response of the church in the face of this situation. According to Tillich the response has been, for the most part, contradictory. On the one hand the conservative, orthodox elements of the church have defended themselves by retiring to their traditional pre-scientific understanding of doctrine, cult, and life. They made a sharp distinction between the natural and the supernatural (Tillich uses the prefix "supra-"). God created the universe at a particular point in time in the past, and governs and rules it according to his divine purpose.[6] This conceptualization, however, reduces God the infinite to finitude. He is only an extension of the finite categories used by human intelligence to organize experience. God is made finite by making a distinction between God's world and this world, by determining the beginning and/or end of time, by making God one cause alongside others, and by attributing individual substance to Him.[7] Supernaturalism and

---

[5]Ibid., p. 44.

[6]Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), I, p. 6.

[7]Ibid.

naturalism are defined in opposition to each other. To understand the concept of God in this fashion is to invite and encourage atheism as the more intelligible alternative.[8]

On the other hand, the liberal response to the situation created by modern rationalism is no better. Instead of understanding the traditional symbols of the faith literally they are re-interpreted in contemporary terms. While the liberal understands the reality of man's existence, she/he pays "the price of adjustment by losing the message of the new reality" of the faith.[9] Vahanian agrees when he points out the danger of apologetic theology.

> . . . it identifies the specific truth of the Christian faith with whatever seems to attract the imagination at a given time. By deliberately making it 'attractive,' the apologist often evacuates this truth of its offensive yet not less essential elements. Christianity thus becomes the glorified version of every cultural and intellectual whim and fancy.[10]

In other words, the liberal alternative too often results in complete accommodation of its theology to some modern criterion of truth.

Both the style of the conservative and that of the liberal must be rejected. According to Tillich, historical providence has provided an alternative to both these styles that is much more congruent with the Christian religion. While many of the leaders of the existentialist movement are devoutly anti-religious, their protest is against the same situation as the church's. That is, the position of persons in the system of production and consumption--the master of

---

[8]Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 45.

[9]Ibid. [10]Vahanian, p. 208.

the universe, etc. Like the churches, existentialism recognized the fallacy of the industrial movement. While humans were supposed to be the master of all things, including themselves, in reality they had become an object among objects, a cog in the massive machine of materiality, to which they must adjust or be destroyed. Existentialism recognized the meaninglessness and emptiness of the situation created by this system. Humankind had become dehumanized.[11] In short, the existentialists reject the "rational" system of thought and life developed by the Western industrial society.[12]

Blaise Pascal was one of the earliest of the existentialists. He was also devoutly Christian. According to him there are two truths inherent in the radical monotheism of Christianity. There is a God whom man can know, and there is a basic corruption of the nature of man. It is essential that man know both these truths. It is this relationship between God and man that Nietzsche rejects. On the one hand if there were a God, Nietzsche could not stand not being Him. On the other hand man cannot stand to have his own finitude, his ugliness, exposed.[13] To know only God and not the wretchedness of man leads to the pride of the philosophers. To know only man's wretchedness and not the Redeemer leads man to the incapacitating despair of the atheists.[14] In knowing his own temporality in contrast to the divine

---

[11]Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 46.

[12]Ibid., p. 105.

[13]Vahanian, pp. xvff.

[14]Ibid., p. xviii.

eternity, his finitude in contrast to God's infinitude, man acts in faith. The transcendent God thus becomes immanent in the world through man's act of faith. God remains wholly transcendent in that He is not identified with objects of creation but by the process of creation in its entirety.

Vahanian calls the realm of man's acts of faith the realm of secularity. By secularity he refers to the "ensemble of man's activities as well as his creativity, all of which reflect the biblical fact that man is created in the image of God, but is not divine per se."[15] Included in secularity are not only the various art forms but also the ecclesiastical, theological, creedal, or liturgical forms. There can be no separation between the religious manifestations of man's creativity (the sacred) and the other obviously secular manifestations of his creativity. The secular is the realm in which religion shows either its relevance or its irrelevance.[16]

B. MAN AS RELIGIOUS CREATURE

Another issue raised by the decline in the power of the concept of God as a symbol involves the question whether or not man is a "religious creature." Is man truly religious in nature? If so, what does this mean?

Paul Tillich has written "as soon as one says anything about religion, one is questioned from two sides." On the one hand, there are those theologians who take religion to be a divine gift of

---

[15]Ibid., p. 66.   [16]Ibid., p. 67.

revelation, as opposed to a creative element in the human spirit. On the other hand, the secular scientists assert that religion is merely an effect of changing psychological and sociological conditions. Both the theologian and the scientist challenge the assertion that religion is an aspect, or element, of the human spirit. Tillich points out that both criticisms make a valid point.

Theologically speaking, religion is not a creation of the human spirit alone. It is also a gift of the divine Spirit. While man is creative in respect to his material existence and his relation to the world, he is absolutely uncreative in his relation to God. Tillich points out that in his relation to God, man is only "receptive." This is the meaning of the classical doctrine of the Bondage of the Will as developed by St. Paul and later by the Reformers.

The scientific perspective is represented in the secular disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology and history. Tillich points out that they

> . . . emphasize the infinite diversity of religious ideas and practices, the mythological character of all religious concepts, the existence of many forms of non-religion in individuals and groups. Religion, they say (with the philosopher Comte), is characteristic for a special stage of human development (the mythological stage), but it has no place in the scientific stage in which we are living. Religion, according to this attitude, is a transitory creation of the human spirit but certainly not an essential quality to it.[17]

Although these criticisms, both from different perspectives, have radically different cosmologies, they both have a common ground. Both "define religion as man's relation to divine beings, whose

---

[17]Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 4.

existence the theological critics assert and the scientific critics deny."[18] For Tillich, any real understanding of religion is impossible as long as this idea exists. To argue either for or against the existence of God is futile. To do so is to make God as a thing beside other things of existence. The question whether or not such a thing exists is a valid question. To start with an assertion that there *is* a highest being called God, who gives to some His revelation and authority, is to take the first step towards an inevitable atheism.

A different point of common ground must be found. If God is not one Being, however supreme, among the many, then religion will not be that special activity that relates to that Being. Indeed, that definition of religion has never been comprehensive enough to include some of the great religions anyway. Therefore, it is inadequate both from the perspective of science and the perspective of many religious persons.

Tillich distinguishes between three basic styles of religion and culture. Each style attempts to interpret the law of life. These styles are called autonomy, heteronomy, and theonomy.

Autonomy begins with the assumption that man is the bearer of universal reason. As such he is the source and measure of culture and religion. He is his own law.[19] As an example Tillich believes our modern humanistic culture to be a self-complacent autonomous culture.[20]

------

[18]Ibid.   [19]Tillich, *The Protestant Era,* p. 56.

[20]Ibid., p. xii, cf. Tillich, *Theology of Culture,* pp. 43f.

A heteronomous religion or culture asserts that man is unable to act according to universal reason--he is irrational. Because of this he must be subjected to a higher law.[21] It is the attempt of a religion or culture to dominate the autonomous creativity of man.[22]

Heteronomy is often confused with the third type of religion and culture. That type is theonomy.[23] Theonomy asserts that the "higher law" to which man is to be subjected to is the innermost law of man himself. It is rooted in the divine ground of being which is also the ground of being of man himself. The law is rooted in the transcendent God but immanent in the nature of man.[24] A theonomous culture is one in which the "ultimate meaning of existence shines through all forms of thought and action; the culture is transparent, and its creations are vessels of a spiritual content."[25]

Again, each of these religious orientations attempt to explain the law of life or the meaning of reality. This has often been described as the "function" of religion. Tillich argues that man's anxiety and sense of meaninglessness is a result of the separation between his essence, what he essentially is or should be, and his existence, what he actually is. The same is true for religion. For religion to exist as an ideal which, in reality is separated from man's everyday existence is to make that religion less than ultimate. In this situation religion exists only as a special compartment of life, which is usually legitimated in functional terms.

---

[21]Ibid., p. 56.   [22]Ibid., p. xii.   [23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid., p. 56.   [25]Ibid., p. xii.

The idea that religion meets functional ends has a long history indeed. In a culture where pragmatism is the modus operandi, it certainly is an idea of profound influence. Probably in no other time in history has the function of religion been so widely separated from the functions of the rest of society. Historically we can trace the functions religion has served for humanity.

The moral function religion has served is to produce good and honest citizens. As long as religion can perform this function everything is fine. But this function depends upon the assumption that religion is more fundamental than morality. Only on that assumption can it make any claims of its own. If religion is legitimated in terms of its re-inforcement of morality, then it must accommodate to the prevailing cultural assumptions. If not it is either silenced or thrown out as superfluous or dangerous for morals.[26] Therefore the morality reflected in religion is acceptable only as long as it is congruous with the moral standards of the society. In a secular society, this traditional function leads to "civil religion."

Religion has also functioned as the "Sacred Canopy," the ultimate world view in which all other truth is put in its proper place. Traditionally religion functioned in the philosophic manner, as a "way of knowledge." But science and modern thought forms reject this traditional role. Religion is reduced to a private sphere; while science and technology, under the banner of secularism, perform the

---

[26]Tillich, *Theology of Culture,* p. 6.

religious function of providing the integrative world view within
which everything is assigned its proper place.

This form of religiosity Vahanian calls secularism, as con-
trasted to secularity. Secularism is an expropriation of religion
for finite causes. Vahanian sees few attitudes to be more "religious"
than those of "certain secularists, who have deified democracy or
sex or the classless society."[27]

Both conservative and liberal Christianity have accepted the
compartmentalization of religion, as well as its functional basis,
though in different ways. The conservatives have characteristically
done this by accepting religion as a "leap of faith" bridging the gap
between the literalistic "truth" of biblical symbols and the doubt
created by the rational mind. They have applied the answers implied
in the religious symbols to questions that are not implied in the
rational mind. They have the answers to the questions no one is
asking. In their insecurity in the realm of rational they have sought
security in a heteronomous, and thus functionalized, structure of
religion.

The liberals are the great pragmatists! They tend to accept
secular, scientific cultural assumptions as the reality to which
religious understandings must be accommodated. Whatever fits this
world-view is acceptable--otherwise it must be either re-interpreted
(demythologized) or rejected. They are lost in finitude because their

---

[27]Vahanian, p. 67.

frame of reference precludes an understanding of the symbols of the transcendent. They ask questions and expect answers which they do not find in biblical religion. Therefore religion is legitimated by its functional relevance to those areas of life which are considered most critical. Whether these are psychological or social health, or political ideology, the function of religion is to support their claims for more ultimate consideration. But this is another brand of civil religion.

Tillich's approach offers an alternative which rejects both this compartmentalism and functionalism. He writes:

> When we say that religion is an aspect of the human spirit, we are saying that if we look at the human spirit from a special point of view, it presents itself to us as religious. What is this view? It is the point of view from which we can look into the depth of man's spiritual life. Religion is not a special function of man's spiritual life, but it is the dimension of depth in all of its functions.[28]

The metaphor "depth" means, for Tillich, that the religious aspect points to the ultimate, infinite, unconditional element in man's selfhood. Religion in this sense is ultimate concern and ultimate concern is manifest in all creative functions of the human spirit. "It is manifest in the moral sphere as the unconditional seriousness of the moral demand.[29]

Tillich feels the narrower and customary sense of the word religion is a reflection of the "tragic estrangement of man's spiritual life from its own ground and depth."[30] For religion to be segmented

---

[28]Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 6.

[29]Ibid., p. 8.   [30]Ibid.

into specific areas of human existence such as morality, or philosophy, or aesthetics, is to fail to open up the depth of the totality of existence out of which man finds ultimate meaning, substance, judgement, and creative courage.

C. IDOLATRY

H. Richard Niebuhr states that faith is a universal human necessity. In faith persons orient their lives around value-centers and objects of devotion.[31] We have seen that the center of valuation and devotion may be a supernatural Being for some while for others it is a cause. Whatever the center of valuation may be it is clear that it is basic to the identity of being human to seek the security of a closed society with universal social confidence and loyalty. In radical monotheism neither closed society nor the cause of such closed society is the center of valuation. It is the principle of being itself. Its "reference is to no one reality among the many but to one beyond all the many, whence all the many derive their being, and by participation in which they exist."[32] Tillich refers to this as the unconditional ground of all being. Niebuhr refers to the center of valuation as that which is ultimate in the person's life. Tillich's term "ultimate concern" unifies the subjective and objective acts of faith. It is thus a centered act of the personality toward the

---

[31]H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1943), p. 23.

[32]Ibid., p. 32.

ultimate ground of being. God is both the object and subject of

faith. It is this element that indicates the infinity of God. It

is also this element that exposes the finitude of idolatry. The

finite "remains an object which the believer looks at as subject."[33]

Faith, as the centered act of personality, has as its centering point

that which is on the periphery of the center of being. As such it

leads to a loss of the center and a disruption of personality.

Idolatry is the self-destructive faith in finite centers of valuation

which therefore denies the personality of the depth of existence.[34]

One form of idolatry is henotheism. In henotheism a nation,

a family, a tribe, a social movement or even humanity itself may be

the center of valuation. In other words, ultimate faith is directed

toward some closed society. Each participant in the community derives

meaning and valuation by his position in the enduring life of the

community. The reality to which he belongs transcends his own reality

in that it continues to exist even though he ceases to exist. The

individual is dependent on it but it is not dependent on him. His

standard of valuation reflects the standard established by the

community. God is the center of the collective consciousness. In

other words God is identified with the center of valuation of the

community, whatever that center may be. Nationalism is an example of

this alliance. Nationalism reveals the character of its faith when

---

[33]Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. 11.

[34]Ibid., pp. 8ff.

the welfare or sovereignty of the nation is at stake and extreme forms of patriotism emerge in all fields of human creativity including art, literature, science, and education.

Berger states that the internalized roles of the individuals in the henotheistic society carry with them the mysterious power ascribed to them by their religious legitimations. Socialized identity is recognized by the individual as something sacred, grounded in the "nature of things" as created or willed by the gods. His identity is grounded in the identity of the gods and thus, he has assumed the identity of a god. He lives in a world he has willed himself as if it were his destiny to do so by the transcendent. His alienation is religiously legitimated and his independence from the transcendent is augmented both in his psyche and in his social structures.

An alternative to henotheism is polytheism. When confidence in the value center of the henotheistic faith is broken, people take recourse in a frantic search for a center of valuation, resulting in multiple centers of valuation. Loyalty is scattered among the gods. The reasons for the disintegration of the henotheistic faiths are many. Among them are internal conflicts, a realization that the structures of society are only an extension of certain power-seeking individuals or groups, the revelation that what appears to be a unified society is actually without integrity, the rational dissolution of social mythologies, encounters with other social structures superior in power or glory, or the swallowing up of the smaller society

into a larger one. All these forces and more signal the death of any particular henotheistic faith in a pluralistic and interrelated world.

A common contemporary response to this situation is to substitute the self for society. An isolated selfhood is made to be both the value-center and cause. Epicureanism and extreme existentialism are examples of this effort. The epicurean seeks to find himself in himself but in his vanity finds it in the pain-and-pleasure feeling that is a part of his finitude. Pleasurable existence is a cause because his objectivity is required to organize its activities toward the establishment and maintenance of this pleasurable feeling. His guilt is to seek those illusory pleasures that result in his pain. Consumerism, and enjoyment of the good life in an affluent society are the current American form of this illusion.

The radical existentialist seeks to establish its center in the self and in a cause projected by the self. Man makes himself in order to be God. He loses himself in order that the self-cause may exist.[35]

> Such extreme existentialism seems to represent the dying effort of the self to maintain itself by faith--but not by faith in nothing. Its confidence is not in the confidence in the self but of a self, and it is confidence in nothing; its cause is not the self but the self projecting itself toward nothing.[36]

A more common expression of polytheism is found in the kind of pluralism which depends on its meanings on multiple centers of valuation. One's sense of worth is determined by the judgment of

---

[35]Niebuhr, p. 29.   [36]Ibid.

their gods, not on their participation in the cause. There is a
frantic effort to "please the gods," or conform to the role expecta-
tions of the various reference groups in which they participate. If
the supernatural is denied, this effort is directed to their fellowmen,
or to a variety of institutions or associations which are therefore
made the centers of valuation. The individual looks simply and
uncritically from one devotion to the next, with no seriousness about
any of them. His pluralism of values therefore rejects exclusivity.
"There is no point of reference outside which (he) can determine the
relative value of competing ideals."[37]

The combination of individualism and conformity to heteronomous
demands is especially characteristic of contemporary America. E. Lab.
Cherbonnier sees individualism as a watchword of America.[38] Harvey
Cox calls this man's Promethean spirit. Individualism is widely
acclaimed and touted by the American spirit to be an "infallible guide
to economic, political, and even moral decisions."[39] He observes that
one should expect to find America to be an incubator of strong inde-
pendent personalities. But he contrasts to this expectation studies
by Erich Fromm and David Reisman who indicate unmistakably that:

> We are fostering instead a mass-produced citizenry whose
> greatest desire is to emulate, whose greatest fear is to deviate,
> and whose greatest skill is to be all things to all men. Most

---

[37]Ibid., p. 31.

[38]E. Lab. Cherbonnier, "Idolatry," in Marvin Halverson (ed.),
A Handbook of Christian Theology (New York: Meridian Books, 1958),
p. 181.

[39]Ibid.

recently William Whyte, in *The Organization Man*, has detected
one of the strongest pressures for the rubber-stamp mentality
in that bastion of free enterprise, private industry itself.
While consciously doing obeisance to the god of rugged indi-
vidualism, the American corporation often dictates to its
executives their taste in dress and automobile, their choice
of friends and clubs, and even their ethical and political
views.[40]

The individualist Prometheus, in his attempt to offer salvation to the world himself came to be devoured. Just as Prometheus came to be broken on the rock, the executives are broken. One can't help but think about our educational system. Thinking themselves to be individualists our children are broken on the rock of conformity.

D. SCOPE AND ORGANIZATION OF THESIS

Having defined the problem of idolatry, I wish to deal with the two forms discussed above. That is, the henotheism of civil religion and the polytheism of wealth and consumerism. Chapter II will deal with civil religion. Chapter IV will deal with consumerism. However, this thesis also has a special interest in the role of the media in sustaining idolatry. So, Chapter IV will also be concerned with the role of the mass media. As preparation for the treatment of the media, Chapter III will be concerned with an investigation of signs and symbols. This will provide us with the theological tools with which to interpret the function of the media in modern idolatry. Chapter V will be a brief summary and the conclusions of this study.

---

[40]Ibid., pp. 181-182.

CHAPTER II

CIVIL RELIGION

Peter L. Berger observes that every human society is involved in the enterprise of world-building. Religion occupies a distinctive role in this act of human creativity.[1] In the past, the church was in the center of this activity. However, with the advent of the Enlightenment and the Church's subsequent loss of prestige, the secular institutions have increasingly dominated the sphere of world-building. This is not to say that *religion* has lost its place in this activity. H. Richard Niebuhr observes that faith "as a human confidence in a center and conserver of value and as human loyalty to a cause seems to manifest itself almost as directly in politics, science, and other cultural activities as it does in religion."[2] If that is so, then we may find those same characteristics and tendencies as we find in religion in the political domain. The faith we find in political institutions is similar to that of religion. The value-center of the nation-state commands centrality in the faith and activity of its citizens. However, as is common in religions, the nation-states are plagued by conflicts in various centers of valuation. Therefore the purpose of this chapter will be to study the nature of the nation-state

---

[1]Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 3.

[2]H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943), p. 64.

20

religion and the ways it manifests itself in the lives of its citizens.

A. NATIONALISM AND A UTILITARIAN CONCEPT OF GOD

Civil religion demands the same loyalty to its cause as any other religion does. This is indicated by the extensive use of language and other symbols of loyalty. An example is the Pledge of Allegiance. Niebuhr notes that the word "loyalty" has been so thoroughly identified with political fidelity that many churchmen hesitate to use it in speaking of faith for fear that they be thought to glorify an essentially nationalistic and narrowly patriotic attitude.[3] In whatever context the word "loyalty" is used, it refers to a particular set of mind, which is focused on devotion and service to a cause. That is true whether its referent is the church, the home, or the state. The kind of faith the political institution seeks is not fearful obedience but uncritical, unquestioning love. It seeks loyalty to more than itself. It also seeks loyalty to its cause. The political institution presents itself not only as a unity but a unity with a mission which transcends itself. Although the process of development of the modern nation-states involves many elements, this "sense of mission and the conception of themselves as faithful servants of a large cause significant for other nations and other men" is an important element.[4] Niebuhr notes that the national-state of Spain conceived of itself as the servant of the true Catholic faith.

---

[3]Ibid., p. 65.   [4]Ibid., p. 66.

The United States and France united themselves with the cause of democracy. Czarist Russia was known as "Holy Russia, a God-bearing people, and its Messianic sense has not diminished but increased with the substitution of international communism for Orthodoxy."[5]

The common element in these instances of nationalism is the service to a cause. To the extent that their service to the cause is identified with God, they operate on a utilitarian concept of God.

Bellah recognizes in Benjamin Franklin's autobiography the concept of a utilitarian God. While the tone is Christian the content is not Christian. Bellah traces the development of the concept of a utilitarian God with the various Revolutionary heroes and presidents of America. God is seen as austere, more related to law and order than to salvation and love. Even though He is seen in a somewhat deist conception, He is not merely a "watchmaker God." He is actively interested and involved in the history of America. America is equated with Israel. These characteristics reflect the private and public views of the Founding Fathers and represent their understanding of the obligations of government.[6]

B. THE BIBLICAL MAN

Vahanian notes that the original intent in the founding spirit of America was to "unfetter the heart of the original Christian gospel

---

[5]Ibid.

[6]Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 173ff.

and let it live anew."[7] He recognizes the Pilgrim as the corollary
to the biblical man. He was either a "nomad or his rootage in the
American soil was so recent that he could identify himself with those
newly converted pagans, the early Christians, in being rooted in the
soil of a new religion."[8] The Pilgrim represented the new man, or the
new Adam reborn in Christ. He was a member of the American Israel,
the proverbial Kingdom of God. The Pilgrim's repudiation of tradition
reflects his allegiance to a higher authority. However this allegiance
was soon "severed from any sound or vitally religious reason for the
repudiation of tradition. The outcome was the myth of an absolutely
new beginning, not in God but in one's self, the myth of Adamic man."[9]
Literary and cultural trends invested this secularized Adam with
attributes of a pseudo-religious character. Hope and faith were
replaced with progress and the natural goodness of man and man's
ultimate bond was with the societal structure. The outcome is that
the Adamic man is finally succeeded by Christic man. The Christic man
adopts the salvific role of the Christ. The attributes of Christ are
universalized and thus become "leveled-down" to a general immanentism.[10]

Bellah sees the first symbols to emerge from Adamic man to be
connected with the image of the new Israel. The Revolution is seen in
the light of the Exodus. The Declaration of Independence is seen in
the light of the sacred scriptures, and George Washington in the light

---

[7]Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God* (New York: Braziller, 1961), p. 17.

[8]Ibid., p. 18.   [9]Ibid., p. 19.   [10]Ibid., p. 20.

of Moses. The Civil War introduced fundamental questions as to

national meaning. The first issue was not the question of slavery,

although this issue is not to be belittled, but of unity.[11] The new

symbols to emerge are synonymous with the Christic man. The themes of

death for a higher cause (unity, freedom), sacrifice, reconciliation,

and rebirth enter the civil religion.[12]

> Nowhere is it stated more vividly than in the Gettysburg Address,
> itself part of the Lincolnian 'New Testament' among the civil
> scriptures. Robert Lowell has recently pointed out the 'insistent
> use of birth images' in this speech explicitly devoted to 'these
> honored dead': 'brought forth,' 'conceived,' 'created,' 'a new
> birth of freedom.'[13]

And finally the martyred president is linked to the martyrs of the war

and the Christian archetype is complete.

America emerged from the Civil War with strengthened claims of

unity and sovereignty. The cause of democracy was given new salvific

images. Though the country remained relatively weak as a world power

until some time between the First and Second World Wars "our role was

seen as purely exemplary. Our democratic republic rebuked tyranny by

merely existing."[14]

The loyalty demanded of the citizens of America as well as the

others serving a cause

> has a double direction: on the one hand it has been claimed by
> the transcendent end, on the other, by the nation itself as
> representative of the cause. That in this ambivalent, not
> ambiguous, situation there is much confusion, mucy hypocracy,
> and much self-delusion is all too clear.[15]

---

[11]Bellah, p. 177.   [12]Ibid.   [13]Ibid., pp. 177-178.

[14]Ibid., p. 184.   [15]Niebuhr, p. 66.

However Bellah argues that at its best civil religion is a "genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people."[16] In other words, civil religion is in the same boat as any other religion. There exists the possibility of the immanent expression of the transcendent.

Therefore civil religion bases its existence on the loyalty of its constituents and not just on their fear and desires for benefits. It achieves unity and justifies its existence by professed faith in transcendent causes. The loyalty they expect from their citizens is a double loyalty extended to the nation's cause and also to the nation *as* cause. It is within this society

> . . . that the individual becomes a person, that he attains and holds onto an identity, and that he carries out the various projects that constitute his life. Man cannot exist apart from society. The two statements, that society is the product of man and that man is the product of society, are not contradictory. They rather reflect the inherently dialectic character of the societal phenomenon.[17]

Berger explains this dialectic as a process of three moments, or steps; externalization, objectivation, and internalization.

C. EXTERNALIZATION, OBJECTIVATION, AND INTERNALIZATION

Humanity, collectively "externalize themselves in common activity and thereby produce a human world."[18] Society, with all its

---

[16]Bellah, p. 179.   [17]Berger, p. 3.

[18]Ibid., p. 81.

cultural and religious accouterments, is a product of collective human activity. This society "attains the status of objective reality. The same world, *as* objective rality, is internalized in socialization, becoming a constituent part of the subjective consciousness of the socialized individual."[19] The individual's confrontation with society requires an ongoing process of internalization--his participation with the collective activity of the society. This does not mean that man must cooperate with oppressive actions of the external reality, but only to the extent that he does participate in the objective meaning of that external reality will that society be real or meaningful for him. In other words, "society, even when it manifests itself to the individual as extreme oppression, is meaningful in a way that nature is not."[20] Another way of saying it is the immanent is more obvious to man than the transcendent. Berger uses the illustration of an execution of an individual by his fellowmen in which the manner of execution is not unlike a natural death--such as hitting him with a rock. Whether the rock fell off a cliff and killed him or was thrown at him, the manner of death is the same. The difference is in the meaning of the incident. The meaning of the natural event is not nearly so important to the rational mind as the intentional event.

> The individual may 'co-operate' in the execution in a way in which he never can in the accident--namely, by apprehending it in terms of those objective meanings he shares, albeit un-happily, with his executioners. Thus the victim of an execution can die 'correctly' in a way that would be more difficult for the victim of an accident.[21]

---

[19]Ibid.   [20]Ibid., p. 82.   [21]Ibid., pp. 81-82.

The process of objectivation implies the production of a real social structure which is external to the individuals within that society. The process of internalization implies that this same social structure will have the status of reality within the consciousness of the individual. However, the process of internalization involves a duplication of consciousness. Part of our consciousness is shaped by the socialization process. To this extent we are products of the social structures. There is a dialectical tension between this socially and objectively assigned identity and our subjectively appropriated identity. The result is our self-objectivation. There is an internal confrontation between the "socialized and non-socialized components of the self, reiterating within consciousness itself the external confrontation between society and the individual."[22] The socialized and non-socialized parts of the self have a dialectical character in that they "do not stand in a mechanistic cause/effect relationship but rather produce each other reciprocally and continually."[23] The two components of the self can now engage in an internal conversation which reiterates the conversation of the individual and society. Berger cites the example of the individual attempting to act out the role of pasha in a middle-class society. His external conversation with society is replicated in his internal conversation between the socialized part of his self (the part that says no) and the non-socialized part (which, in its fantasy, longs to be in that role).

---

[22]Ibid., p. 84.   [23]Ibid.

Which of the two are most real for the individual determines his
level of adjustment to social reality, or his mental health. A part
of his self is alien to him. This estrangement is a characteristic
of humanity.

At this point Berger recognizes two ways one might proceed:

--one, in which the strangeness of world and self can be
reappropriated by the 'recollection' that both world and
self are products of one's own activity--the other, in which
such reappropriation is no longer possible, and in which
social world and socialized self confront the individual as
inexorable facticities analogous to the facticities of nature.
The latter process may be called alienation.[24]

D. ALIENATION

Alienation is the situation in which the individual forgets
his role in the creation of social structures. There is no dialectic
between the individual and society. The fundamental difference between
society and nature is ignored. It is "forgotten" that society is
man-made while nature is not. It is a false consciousness, an over-
extension of the process of objectivation in which the "social world
then ceases to be an open arena in which the individual expands his
being in meaningful activity, becomes instead a closed aggregate of
reifications divorced from present or future activity."[25]

There are three important points about alienation. It is
false because man, even alienated man, continues to participate in
the co-production of society. The paradox is that the world he pro-
duces denies his own existence. Secondly, the development of identity

---

[24]Ibid., p. 85.   [25]Ibid., p. 86.

and self-consciousness always involves alienation. The loss of innocence, freedom and maturity involve the envisagement of possibilities contrary to those which are merely given by society. Both phylogenetically and ontogenetically, the individual begins as a fallen creature. He, if he is successful, goes from the state of alienation to un-alienation. Thirdly, alienation is to be absolutely distinguished from anomy.[26] Whereas man's finite structures of society are constantly threatened with disintegration into the chaos of meaninglessness (anomy), the apprehension of the society in alienated terms maintains the structures of that society precisely because it strengthens that society in its struggle against meaninglessness. Anomy is defined as that lurking "irreality" that threatens every socially defined reality. Said another way, nomos is edifice or structure of reality "erected in the face of potent and alien forces of chaos" or non-reality.[27]

On the role of religion in this regard, Berger states:

> Religion has always been one of the strongest bulwarks against anomy because of this same process. Religion has been so powerful an agency of nomization precisely because it has also been a powerful, probably the most powerful, agency of alienation. By the same token . . . religion has been a very important form of false consciousness.[28]

"Otherness" or the transcendental nature of the sacred is an essential quality in most religions. A fundamental assumption in these religions is that the transcendent somehow impinges or borders upon the empirical world. Thus the awe, the numinous dread, or the

---

[26]Ibid.   [27]Ibid., p. 24.   [28]Ibid., p. 87.

adoration of that transcendent Being is "dignified with the status of genuine experience."[29] Within the sociological or scientific perspectives this statement cannot be qualified. While the Transcendent is beyond scientific analysis, the manifestations of religions in behavioral and institutional forms is within human experience, and is thus within the scope of empirical investigation. Berger says, ". . . whatever else the constellations of the sacred may be 'ultimately,' empirically they are products of human activity and human signification—that is, they are human projections."[30] These projections are a function of man's externalization and are thus objectivated as are the other externalizations of society. Insofar as the externalizations imply transcendence, they may be described as alienated projections.[31]

Berger calls the "fundamental recipe" of religious legitimation this process of ascribing to super- or non-human beings those products of his own creativity. Thus human creativity is denied. The human nomos becomes a divine cosmos. Berger stops short of equating religion with alienation. However, he sees the alienating power inherent in religion to be historically responsible for the various world-building and world-maintaining enterprises. While responsible for much of human creativity, it remains that religion tends to alienate the humans from themselves because they deny their responsibility for world-building and maintaining.[32]

---

[29]Ibid., p. 88.

[30]Ibid., p. 89.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid., p. 90.

Whatever truth may lie behind the assertions of religion with regard to the explanation of the universe, history tells the story of their false consciousness. This falsification can be illustrated by the various mystifications of human meanings. Once the veil of mystification is thrown over them, any comprehension of them is denied--"objectivated expressions of the human become dark symbols of the divine."[33]

Social and political institutions are mystified and legitimated by religion by attaching them to divine instigation. For instance the institution of marriage is, empirically speaking, a society's attempt to "program" the sexual activity of its members. It sets limits and procedures that are compatible with the standards of that society, which are partly a function of the environmental circumstances. The result is the diversity of the sexual mores between societies (polygamy, monogamy, exogamy, heterogamy, homogamy, etc.). To go against these mores is not only to go against the human sanctions but it is to incur divine wrath.

Another example comes from the realm of politics. Societies are faced with the problem of the allocation of power and the legitimation of the political structures created by this allocation. The structures have the special task of "explaining and justifying the requisite employment of means of physical violence."[34] The mystification of the empirical character of the political arrangements gives

---

[33]Ibid.   [34]Ibid., p. 91.

the "arrangement" or political structure divine basis. Whatever

means of political expediency are necessary are thus sanctioned as the

"Word of the Lord."

Just as institutions are divinized, so are the individual

roles within that institution.

> . . . the representation implied in every role is mysteriously
> endowed with the power to represent suprahuman realities. Thus
> the husband faithfully channeling his lust in the direction of
> his lawful spouse not only represents in this reiterated action
> all other faithful husbands, all other complementary roles
> (including those of the faithful wives) and the institution of
> marriage as a whole, but he now also represents the prototypical
> action of connubial sexuality as willed by the gods and finally,
> represents the gods themselves.[35]

By the same token the government's executioner not only represents

the political institution (kingship, democracy, autocracy, etc.) but

law, morality and divine justice. The suprahuman sanction overcomes

the individual misgivings and alienation is duplicated and incorpo-

rated into the very identity of the individual. It also "facilitates

a further process of falsification that may be described as bad

faith."[36]

"Bad faith" is described as one in which a genuine decision

is negated by fictitious necessities. Given a choice between two or

more courses of action the individual is influenced by one choice

designated as necessary by his identification with the role in which

he is presented the choice. Thus the "choice" is no choice at all;

there is no choice but to do what is expected of one in that role.

---

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid., p. 93.

His subjective identity is merged with the social "type." This typification is alienating and anthropologically impossible. It "constitutes a fabrication of false consciousness. The individual acting on this presupposition is acting on bad faith."[37]

Subjective alienation is thus an effective barrier against anomy. Once the false unity of the self is established, and as long as it seems to be reasonable, it is a source of strength against anomy.

> Ambivalences are removed. Contingencies become certainties. There is no more hesitation between alternative possibilities of conduct. The individual 'knows who he is'--a psychologically most satisfactory condition. Bad faith in no way presupposes some sort of inner turmoil or 'bad conscience.' On the contrary, the individual who seeks to divest himself of the bad faith institutionalized in his situation in society is likely to suffer psychologically and in his 'conscience,' quite apart from the external difficulties he will probably encounter as a result of such 'unprogrammed' ventures.[38]

Bad faith, just as false consciousness in general, is not dependent on religious legitimation. Conversely, every religion does not necessarily legitimate false consciousness. However, religion can effectively maintain bad faith. In the same way that religion "mystifies and thus fortifies the illusionary autonomy of the humanly produced word, so it mystifies and fortifies, its introjection in individual consciousness."[39] The socialized identity is thus cognitively understood by the individual to be willed by the Holy. It is grounded in the nature of reality itself.

His institutions, his very identity being grounded in divine

---

[37]Ibid., p. 94.   [38]Ibid.   [39]Ibid., p. 96.

necessity, he sees his history and his future to be the will of the gods. His activity in the world therefore becomes a process. This further extention of alienation means that matters of choice are not only a matter of his social role but a necessity of destiny.

> Now it is important to recall here that the relationship between human activity and the world produced by it is and remains dialectical, even when this fact is denied (that is, when it is not present to consciousness). Thus men produce their gods even while they apprehend themselves as 'totally dependent' upon these their products. But, by the same token, the 'other world' of the gods takes on a certain autonomy vis-à-vis the human activity that ongoingly produces it. The supra-empirical reality posited by the religious projection is capable of acting back upon the empirical existence of men in society.[40]

Therefore rather than simply an inert reflection of the society, religion is itself creative in respect to society and individuals. This opens the possibility of de-alienation itself being religiously legitimated. While the general tendency of religion is to legitimate institutional and individual alienation, this is not an absolute necessity.

E. DE-ALIENATION

It must be reiterated that the various institutions such as the institutions of sexuality and power first appear as thoroughly alienated structures. Only in later developments do they approach de-alienation, if at all. If institutions do de-alienate, so do the various plausibility structures that previously maintained these institutions.[41]

---

[40]Ibid.

[41]Ibid., p. 92.

Because religion views institutions sub specie *aeternitatis*, that is as subordinate but eternally co-existing reality, there exists the possibility of radically relativizing and thus invalidating the traditional religious legitimations. The more sophisticated soteriologies of India, for instance, relativize all empirical reality (*maya*) as being only an illusion. Against the illusory realm of *maya* exists the ultimate reality of the *braman-atman*. There are two typical implications of this phenomenon. There is the option of an ascetic withdrawal from this illusion-world in quest for liberation (*moksha*). On the other hand there is the possibility of continued participation in the various sacred and secular institutions but with an attitude of inner detachment. This is the classical distinction between "way of knowledge" and "way of action."

In the biblical tradition, the doctrine of God as the wholly transcendent relativizes the institutions as "nothing but human works, devoid of inherent sanctity or immortality."[42] This relativization of the social institutions and the concomitant disruption of the human-divine continuum was the early distinction of Judaism in the ancient world of religion--state alliance. For example, one group of Israelites considered the institution of kingship as a kind of profanization, as contrasted to the divine monarchy of the neighboring states.

> The episode of the condemnation of David by Nathan (2 Samuel 12:1-7) nicely shows the humanizing (and ipso facto, de-alienating) consequence of this profanization--David is denied his royal prerogative of bad faith and addressed as just another man, responsible as a man for his actions.[43]

[42]Ibid., p. 99.   [43]Ibid.

In American history the subordination of the sovereignty of the nation over the individual to the individual's responsibility to God is another example of de-alienation.

Just as social structures can be de-alienated and thus human-ized, so can the roles of the individuals representing those structures. Therefore false consciousness and bad faith can be revealed by their relativization. By relativization of the entire social order, the web of religious mystifications and legitimations is religiously removed and that order is revealed again as externalizations of human creativity. Religion is thus both a world-maintaining and world-shaking force. It has both alienating and de-alienating potential.

This de-alienating potential is one thing that gives western politics its character. In western politics there is "a ferment of monotheist conviction and a constant struggle of universal with particularist faith. National faith is forever being qualified by monotheism."[44] Although it cannot be said that America is a God-fearing nation, there is a constant struggle between monotheism and henotheism. We are made aware of this struggle at two points: when we attempt to understand historically some of our great political decisions of the past and in the continuation of those decisions by current policy making. If we inspect the reasons for the initial decisions we invariably find multiple causes. One example is the decision to give constitutional protection to the freedom of religion.

---

[44]Niebuhr, p. 69.

On the one hand, this decision was based on the necessity to prevent political rivalry and disunity between the various sects. On the other hand, the decision was based on the recognition that loyalty to God was prior to any civic responsibility. Understood in the former context this would mean the state was exercising its sovereign power. Understood in the latter context it would mean acknowledgement by the state of a "limitation of its sovereignty and of the relative character of the loyalty it is entitled to claim."[45]

Which context controls the understanding of religious freedom cannot be determined by reference to historical resolutions. "The choice has not been made once and for all in the past. It is repeated in daily decisions."[46] Because of minimal distinctions between the basis of previous decisions, new decisions are made, by and large, without notice. Niebuhr cites the example of the Supreme Court case of U.S. vs. Macintosh, October 1930. In this case the dissenting opinion states:

> In the forum of conscience, duty to a moral power higher than
> the state has always been maintained . . . The essence of
> religion is belief in a relation to God involving duties
> superior to those arising from any human relation.

However the majority opinion it was stated that:

> government must go forward upon the assumption, and safely can
> proceed upon no other, that unqualified allegiance to the nation
> and submission and obedience to the laws of the land, as well
> as those made for war as those made for peace, are not incon-
> sistent with the will of God.[47]

While God and nation are not specifically identified in the majority

---

[45]Ibid., pp. 69-71.   [46]Ibid., p. 71.   [47]Ibid.

decision, the distinction between the two is blurred over in a way
not unusual. There exists, both in the public and in the political
roles, a confusion between the social will and the divine will, and a
resulting confusion over the center of loyalty.

F. SUMMARY

At the beginning of this chapter we observed that Civil Reli-
gion demands the same loyalty and commitment as any other religion
does. It is now possible to comment on the tendencies and dangers
inherent in the conservative and liberal religious alternatives,
especially as they relate to the issues dealt with in this chapter.

The conservative alternative tends to identify loyalty to the
Country with loyalty to God. This identification makes Crusades
possible, especially against Godless enemies. The conservative also
tends to accept the compartmentalization of religion and politics,
which is so characteristic of modern secular societies. Religion
serves the function of justifying and legitimating various societal
needs and demands. Yet, since religion is "privatized," it is identi-
fied with "priestly and individual" concerns. The prophetic and
social critical concern of religion tends to be either ignored or
denied.

The liberal alternative tends to accommodate religion to
various political segments and ideologies. It tends to identify the
various social or political causes with the cause of God. The function
of religion is to raise the consciousness with respect to the social

and political concerns. Religion is only functional if it can meet the various social and psychological crises. Thus, religion retains its relevance by its alliance with, and subservience to, more contemporary concerns. The priestly and spiritual aspect of religion tends to be given a role as techniques and professionalism replace reliance on traditional religious resources. The encounter with the Divine as a dimension of transcendence, is either ignored or denied.

A probing theological concern with almost any contemporary issue (Racism, Sexism, War, Ecology, Conservation, Death, etc.) leads to serious questioning of either of these approaches. Both approaches invest finite institutions and causes with ultimate concern and significance. A theonomous approach is called for in which the ultimate meaning and concern of the individual and society transcends finite objects and concerns. The social and political institutions in the theonomous culture reflect a spiritual concern not for control or analysis but for their divine significance. "The individual is entirely surrounded and carried by this all-penetrating spiritual substance out of which blessedness (and also curse) comes to him. He cannot escape it."[48] Theonomy requires that ultimate loyalty not be given to any finite institution or cause, whether it be America, democracy, liberation, or whatever. Ultimate loyalty is given only to the transcendent cause of all being. A religion, whether civil or church, based on faith in the ultimate ground of all being denies a

---

[48]Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 44.

compartmentalization of religion into any specific sphere of activity or concern. Neither the priestly, the spiritual, or the prophetic aspect of religion is denied. In the theonomous culture love, freedom, and justice is affirmed in thought and action.

CHAPTER III

THE MEDIUM OF RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

Tillich has observed that

> . . . we are in a process in which a very important thing is
> being discovered: namely, that there are levels of reality
> of great difference, and that these different levels demand
> different approaches and different languages; not everything
> in reality can be grasped by the language which is most ade-
> quate for mathematical sciences.[1]

Religious truths are given to us in symbolic form. This is so because
only symbolic communication can relate to both conscious and uncon-
scious thought. To explain the relationship between symbols and the
intellectual processes Cox quotes Freud as stating that optical memory
residues and visual thinking are fundamental to man. While thinking
in images is an incomplete form of consciousness it does more closely
approximate the processes of the unconscious. In other words, the
movement from unconscious thought to conscious thought is a movement
from image to idea. However, the "primal vision lingers on, coloring
and framing the words that seek to express it."[2] Religious truths
must be communicated in symbolic form to reach the depth of human
understanding and thought. Only when something is accepted uncon-
sciously as well as consciously can it be made an ultimate concern.

---

[1] Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (London: Oxford University
Press, 1959), pp. 53-54.

[2] Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and The Id* in Harvey Cox, *Seduction
of the Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 265.

41

If someone has an ultimate concern that she/he would like to communicate to another person in such a way as to persuade that person to accept that concern as ultimate, she/he communicates that concern in symbolic language. This is the reason religions use symbols in the form of icons, rituals, and myths to communicate their concerns. Therefore an understanding of symbols is necessary to understand the various messages we receive.

A. SIGN AS DISTINCT FROM SYMBOL

Tillich takes "five steps" in clarifying his ideas on symbols. He begins with a distinction between "sign" and "symbol." In Cox's terms this would be a distinction between "signal" and "story" (from now on I will use Tillich's terminology for the sake of simplicity).

He points out that both sign and symbol are alike in one respect, they both point beyond themselves to something else. He cites the example of a red traffic signal. It does not point to the fact that it is a red traffic signal, but beyond to the meaning that cars must stop. In another respect, however, signals and symbols are different. The symbol *participates* in the meaning or reality to which it points. Tillich uses the flag as an example of symbol. A flag not only points beyond itself to the country which it represents, but in a unique way participates in the power of the nation or government it points to. Thus, to harm the flag is to attack the country. It might not be unimportant here to point out that a symbol for one person might be meaningless, or just a "signal," for another person. For

instance, bread and wine might point to the fact that it is time to eat for one person, whereas it may symbolize for another their participation in the sacrifice of the Christ. Therefore, a symbol remains symbolic only as long as it has the power to re-present the reality in which it participates, and evoke an appropriate response.

Cox believes a distinction between symbol and sign to be an important one. He believes the distinction is essential to understand the various forms of religion and also to grasp the very nature of contemporary societies. While symbols "reflect those forms of human association which blend emotion, value, and history into a binding fabric," signals "make possible large scale and complex types of human association where such binding would not be possible."[3] Symbolic communication is non-specific. It elicits personal response and emendation. It depends on eccentricity, hyperbole and local color and often tells more about the person telling the story than anything else. On the other hand, signal communication is specific. It elicits a specific response and stimulates shared imagination. Signals are clear and concise. They "permit people to move around in systems that would grind to a halt if all communication had to be deep and personal."[4]

Cox believes a balance between symbol and signal must be maintained in religion. Religion must not deny the creative element in the human spirit, through which one tells stories and realizes

---

[3]Cox, p. 10.　　　　　　　　[4]Ibid.

one's relation in society and the world. Neither should religion
conceive of the human spirit in terms that overstep the bounds of human
existence (finiteness, temporality, etc.). By the same token "signal"
or Law cannot be made an end in itself. This was a message of the
prophets and is the heart of the St. Paul's argument with the
Galatians concerning circumcision.[5] Signals are to warn of danger but
are not a danger in and of themselves.

B. FUNCTION OF SYMBOL

Tillich sees another distinction between sign and symbol in
their function. In addition to being representative of a different
reality or meaning, symbols open up levels of reality which otherwise
"remain hidden and cannot be grasped in any other way." Picasso's
"Guernica" was a symbol of great importance to Tillich.[6] For Tillich
this painting was not only symbolic of the massacre that took place
at the town of Guernica by Fascist bombs; it also opened up the
reality of man in a world of guilt, anxiety, and death. Tillich says
of art (as symbol):

> . . . it has character of balance, of colors, of weights, of
> values, and so on. All this is very external. What this
> mediates to you cannot be expressed in any other way than
> through the painting itself. . . .
> . . . But in order to do this something else must be opened
> up--namely, levels of the soul, levels of our interior reality.
> And they must correspond to the levels in exterior reality which
> are opened up by a symbol.[7]

---

[5]Cf. Galatians 2:11-21.   [6]Tillich, pp. 68-69.

[7]Ibid., p. 57.

Thus every symbol is "two-edged." Not only does it open up reality but the soul. Tillich points out that some people are not "opened up" by poetry, music, or other symbols. For these people, presumably, the reality revealed by the symbol remains hidden. This would perhaps be the case in the example of the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. Furthermore, symbols open up *particular* levels of reality which other symbols cannot reveal. Signs can be replaced by a re-definition or simple change—symbols cannot. A sign can be purposely designed or invented. A symbol cannot be assigned symbolic meaning. It is born of the "group unconscious" or "collective unconscious." A new flag or other sign only becomes a symbol when the group to which it is directed says "yes" to it. Conversely, an existing symbol can die or simply become a sign by losing its meaning for its group. Such is the fate of Baal. For us today "Baal" points to an older culture—not one we fear or admire. For the Israelites "Baal" was a symbol of something very powerful for them—another tribe who would like nothing better than to wipe them out. Baal was, in addition, a symbol of idolatry for the Yahwists.

C. RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

This brings us to Tillich's third step of discussion—that is the *nature* of specifically religious symbols. Religious symbols, like any other symbol, opens up new levels of reality. However, the religious symbol opens up the depth dimension of reality itself. It is a symbol of ultimate concern. Tillich states that the religious

symbol symbolizes the "dimension of ultimate reality," and as such reveals the "dimension of the Holy." Therefore the religious symbol itself participates in the "holiness of the Holy according to our basic definition of symbol."[8] He goes on to point out that "participation is not identity; they are not themselves *the* Holy."[9]

It is in connection with this that Tillich sees the "ambiguity" of religion. Because of the relationship between the religious symbol and that "ultimate Ground of Being" to which the symbol points, the human mind has a natural tendency to blur the distinction between the symbol and the "transcendent" to which it points. The symbol becomes directly associated, and thus, equivalent to the wholly other transcendent reality. At the moment this happens the symbol becomes an idol. "All idolatry is nothing else than the absolutizing of symbols of the Holy, and making them identical with the Holy itself."[10] This, Tillich observes, is the way in which holy persons (priests, ministers, popes, prophets, etc.) become a god. In the same way also the various rituals and sacramental activities become "demonized."

D. LEVELS OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

As a fourth consideration Tillich distinguishes between the "levels" of religious symbols. He observes that there are "two fundamental levels in all religious symbols: the transcendent level, the level which goes beyond the empirical reality we encounter, and

---

[8]Ibid., p. 59.   [9]Ibid.   [10]Ibid., p. 60.

the immanent level, the level which we find within the encounter with reality."[11] Tillich cites God himself as a basic symbol on the transcendent level. He is quick to point out however that God is not *a* symbol.

> We must always say two things about him: We must say that there is a non-symbolic element in our image of God--namely, that he is ultimate reality, being itself, ground of being, power of being; and the other, that he is the highest being in which everything that we have does exist in the most perfect way. If we say this we have in our mind the image of a highest being, a being with the characteristics of highest perfection. That means we have a symbol for that which is not symbolic in the idea of God--namely, 'Being Itself.'[12]

Thus our awareness of God as transcendent and unconditioned is not subject to symbolization. The moment we begin speaking of our relationship to God or our "understanding" of God, we must use symbolic language. In our symbolic language "we have both that which transcends infinitely our experience of ourselves as persons, and that which is so adequate to our being persons that we can say, 'Thou' to God and can pray to him."[13] Both the element of the unconditional and the element of the "ego-thou" relationship is essential and must be maintained. To preserve only the element of the unconditioned is to void any possibility of a personal relationship to God. On the other hand to maintain only the ego-thou relationship is to lose the "element of the divine--the unconditional which transcends subject and object and all other polarities."[14]

---

[11]Ibid., p. 61.   [12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid., p. 62.   [14]Ibid.

In addition to speaking of God as the fundamental symbol of our faith we also must speak in symbolic language as to the attributes of God. We say God *is:* love, mercy, power, the omniscient, the omnipresent, almighty, etc. However, if we apply this description to God literally we are faced with an infinite succession of absurdities. These "attributes" of God are necessarily those qualities we have experienced ourselves. They are totally worldly attributes. How is the "worldly" applied to the Transcendent--that beyond worldliness? It can only be applied symbolically. Tillich points out the danger to religion here. The symbolic nature of our perception of God must be both acknowledged and affirmed.

By the same token, when we speak of God's *acts* we are thinking in symbolic terms. We cannot apply our worldly conceptions of "action" to God in terms other than symbolic. Tillich uses the sentence "God has sent his son" to illustrate his reasoning on this point.

> Here we have in the word 'has' temporality. Here is space; 'sending somebody' means moving him from one place to another place. This certainly is speaking symbolically, although spatiality is in God as an element in his creative ground. We say that he 'has sent'--that means that he has caused something. In this way God is subject to the category of causality. And when we speak of him and his Son, we have two different substances and apply the category of substance to him. Now all this, if taken literally, is absurd. If it is taken symbolically, it is a profound expression, the ultimate Christian expression, of the relationship between God and man in the Christian experience. But to distinguish these two kinds of speech, the non-symbolic and symbolic, in such a point is so important that if we are not able to make understandable to our contemporaries that we speak symbolically when we use such language, they will rightly turn away from us, as from people who still live in absurdities and superstitions.[15]

---

[15]Ibid., pp. 62-63.

The immanent level is the level of the appearances of the divine in time and space--the incarnations of the divine. We Christians tend to make a distinction between Christianity and "pagan" religions on the basis of the Incarnation. Tillich points out this is not a distinction at all. In pagansim this is a frequent occurrence. There have always been traditions of the "divine" beings who come to earth to be incarnated into animals, plants, people, or whatever. In some traditions (for instance in the Indonesian doctrine of *Mana*) the divine permeates all reality. Yet, at the same time, it is utterly transcendent and can only be "reached" through ritual, i.e., symbolic worship. The more removed from the transcendent cultures they find themselves, the more incarnations they must have to overcome the remoteness of their existence.

The "sacramental" aspect is another element in the immanent religious symbol. The sacramental is some reality, for instance bread, which becomes the bearer of the Holy in a "special way and under special circumstances." The bread in the Lord's Supper is symbolic. If we take this in a literal way the meaning will be less than symbolic--it becomes a sign. This was the mistake of Zwingli-- by "only symbolic" he meant that the elements are only signs pointing to a story of the past.[16]

Tillich points out a third element on the immanent level. Special objects, like the cross or other special parts of a church

---

[16]Ibid., pp. 64-65. Cf. Bengt Hägglund, *History of Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1966), pp. 243ff.

for instance, originally were a "sign." In use these signs become symbols in that they participate in the reality to which they point. Tillich refers to these as "sign-symbols."[17]

E. THE TRUTH OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

As a last consideration of religious symbols, Tillich studies the question of their truth. A religious symbol is true only so long as it expresses the divine--human encounter. Does the symbol correlate the divine Truth with the human situation? Tillich cites the example of the symbolic virginal birth of Jesus. He points out that it is a late, "obviously legendary" story, unknown to Paul and John. The early Christians, in their attempt to make understandable the full possession of the divine Spirit of Jesus, gave birth to this symbolic legend. The symbol was born of the situation. Now, however, the situation has changed. In the light of modern theological positions the full humanity of the Christ is negated by this legend. Therefore, the symbol has died, at least for some. It did not die because of empirical criticism, but because it no longer is expressive of the divine-human relationship. A religious symbol's truth is in its adequacy in a given situation, its untruth is its inadequacy.

Another level of truth has to do with the "ultimate truth." We recall here Tillich's discussion of the ambiguity of religion, i.e., when the symbols themselves become absolute or directly equivalent to the reality they represent. No religion is exempt from this

---

[17]Ibid., p. 65.

danger. For Tillich the cross is the ultimate example of truth in the Christian message.

> If Christianity claims to have a truth superior to any other truth in its symbolism, then it is the symbol of the cross in which this is expressed, the cross of the Christ. He who himself embodies the fullness of the divine's presence sacrifices himself in order not to become an idol, another god beside God, a god into whom the disciples wanted to make him. And therefore the decisive story is the story in which he accepts the title 'Christ' when Peter offers it to him. He accepts it under one condition that he has to go to Jerusalem to suffer and to die, which means to deny the idolatrous tendency even with respect to himself.[18]

Cox points out that a cardinal sin for the ancient Hebrew man was to attach religious significance to inappropriate objects. The Hebrew developed an earthly appreciation for food and comfort but refused to divinize either, excepting in periods of backsliding. He also developed a healthy capacity to produce and use things without investing them with excessive hopes. "He could build a sturdy ark but not a tower that would touch heaven."[19] In the Old Testament we see a constant battle between Yahweh and syncretistic movements toward nature worship on the one hand and idol worship on the other. This struggle has reappeared throughout western history: in the medieval conflict between the Cathedral and monasticism, in the American version of the City and the Wilderness, and today in the lifestyle conflict between the space age and the rural commune.

In other words the biblical tradition never sanctifies either. It supports both nature and artifact only as long as they are not made

---

[18]Ibid., p. 67.   [19]Cox, p. 300.

ultimate concerns themselves.

F. IMPLICATIONS

Hopefully it has been made clear that the study of "religions," or ultimate concerns, must be done on the basis of the symbolic nature of its message. Symbols are the language of religions.

It should also be clear by now that the narrow definition of religion is not the definition implied here. A definition of religion must include the broad concept of religion in which "that which is made to be an ultimate concern" is included.

We live in a plurality of religions and religiously symbolic messages. We, as Christians, are faced with a dual task in this respect. We are to speak the language of symbols as the only adequate language to express our faith. But, we must also recognize and expose the symbols and religious message of those idolatrous faiths that "be not of God, but of man."

CHAPTER IV

WEALTH AND CONSUMERISM

A. INTRODUCTION

This chapter will be an attempt to study another aspect of the
religious character of our modern culture. Some believe that our
secular society does not need religion, and conclude that it will
continue to gradually lose its grip on the modern citizen's life and
eventually die out all together. Some other people do not believe
this. Harvey Cox quotes Mircea Eliade.

> The great mythological themes continue to repeat themselves in
> the obscure depths of the psyche. . . . It seems that a myth
> itself, as well as the symbols it brings into play, never quite
> disappears from the present world of the psyche; it only changes
> its aspect and disguises its operation.[1]

This changed aspect and operation will be our focus in this
chapter. Quoting Henry Adams, Cox observes that about the year 1600,
the year of the burning of Giordano Bruno, western civilization began
a process of transition from the religious age to a mechanical one.
Adams' interest was in the ways a culture "orders and symbolizes its
meanings, sanctifies its values and celebrates its hopes." Adams
noticed that the dynamo "was not only a forty foot tool man could use
to help him on his way, it was also a forty foot high symbol of

---

[1]Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries,* in Harvey Cox,
Seduction of the Spirit (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 280.

53

where he wanted to go."[2] Surely that is even more true for the airplane, automobile, computer, and nuclear reactor.

Cox defines technology as the tools and procedures men utilize to cope with and modify their environment. When he talks of the symbolism of technology he has in mind the meanings to which the particular tools of technology point. This is not to say that all technology is symbolic of something else. But when the technological artifacts initiate feelings "incommensurate with their utility," they become icons. Of course, they may become icons of either fear or hope. In other words, when the technical artifact becomes a symbol of the self-understanding of a people, it becomes an idol. Furthermore, when it is placed in exhibition, one begins to "pray to it."[3]

An obvious example would be the beautiful blue jets of the "Blue Angels." This precision flight squadron is the pride of the Navy. It is the ultimate symbol of what it means to fly in the U.S. Navy. People by the thousands look skyward as they watch the dazzling beauty of these gods. During the intermission, if they are lucky, the little boys get to sit in the seat where they find their future chariot to the heavens.

In agreement with Tillich, Cox writes that symbols of the sacred are characterized by a high degree of power and of ambiguity. They arouse dread and gratitude, terror and rapture. They are defined not by their content but their relative degree of cultural power.[4]

---

[2]Ibid., p. 281.   [3]Ibid., p. 282.   [4]Ibid., p. 283.

Although Cox departs from Tillich on three minor points, he remains Tillichian in his basic approach. The first difference is that Cox suspects Tillich might not agree with the primacy of the image, although he definitely would have accepted the primacy of "symbols." Second, Cox is more interested in popular culture such as movies, comics, T.V. and commercial art. He sees Tillich as interested mainly in a more refined or aristocratic culture evoked by such names as Durer, Kafka, Tolstoi, and Rembrandt. Finally, Tillich showed less interest in the dynamics of social change, politics, and cultural revolution than Cox.[5] Because Cox deals very specifically with symbols of American wealth and consumerism he will be the primary source for this chapter.

In the last chapter we saw that the "image" precedes the idea or thought. This idea is basic in Aristotelian epistemology and has been developed various authors throughout western history, including Marshall McLuhan in his chapter entitled "The Medium is the Message"[6] and John B. Cobb, Jr. in one of his books.[7]

Cox concludes that if this observation is correct then we are required to:

---

[5]Ibid., pp. 264ff.

[6]Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), pp. 7ff.

[7]John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Structure of Christian Existence* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), p. 27.

'rewrite the history of culture,' and to 'reexamine the postulates of all our philosophies,' it will also force us to ask, 'What is the right basis of education?' We must also, I would add, take up a rather new way of pursuing the enterprise of theology. 'Iconology' is the study of the meaning of visual images.[8]

B. ICONOLOGY AND RITUAL

Cox defines two classes of religious symbol, ritual and myth. A ritual is a dynamic symbol. A ritual is symbolic of a movement from one state to another. Baptism, confirmation and extreme unction are examples of ritual symbols. Cox adopts Paul Ricoeur's (*Symbolism of Evil*) suggestion of two main "axes" for ritual. The first is the defilement-purification axis. The second is the bondage-extrication axis.

The second class of religious symbol is myth. While ritual is a dynamic symbol myth is a static one. It places people in a history and in a universe of value and meaning. There are two types of myth, those having to do with origins and those having to do with destiny. In the first case the myth defines the tradition, the history of the people involved. In the second case the myth is informative as to the ultimate aspirations of the people, what heaven is all about.[9] According to Macquarrie, "eschatological ideas" are derived from myths.[10]

[8]Cox, pp. 261-262.   [9]Ibid., p. 284.

[10]John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), p. 163.

This section will deal with Iconology and ritual, the next with myth.

Baptism is an example of a defilement-purification ritual. Macquarrie recognizes four points in the ritual of baptism. The first point emphasizes the awareness of our sinful condition. We realize that we are a failure. We realize our sin and we want to enter into a new relationship with God. We are justified in finding our new identity in the brotherhood of the Godly. Our sanctification *has begun* with Baptism. Within the community of the faithful and in the light of the Spirit we now are "caught up in the movement of unitive Being." Baptism is "vocation" in that we have our "new identity" among the faithful and we are called to the general ministry of the words.[11] In Cox's terms we move from a state of defilement to a state of purification.

The implications and correlations with our culture are many. Americans are among the most obsessed people in the world with the notion of "cleanliness." We cannot watch television for more than a few minutes without our "deep-seated anxieties" about "defilement" being assailed--and the proper "purification rites" prescribed. Cox points out the demonic irony here. The very detergents we use in our cleansing rituals wind up polluting our lakes and waterways. "Vishnu is also Shiva."[12]

While the defilement-purification type symbolism is obvious in the many advertisements, slogans, etc., the bondage-extrication axis

---

[11]Ibid., p. 409.   [12]Cox, p. 284.

is not so clearly evident. In what ways are we in bondage? Cox

recognizes accumulating evidence that, in spite of the rhetoric about

freedom, "many people still experience themselves as powerless and

immobilized. Ordinary speech abounds with phrases like 'stuck,'

'hung up,' 'rat race,' and 'dead end' to describe work, marriage, and

everyday life."[13]

Throughout history the theme of "being trapped" has recurred

in instance after instance. Socrates described himself as a prisoner

of his own body in *The Apology*. Prometheus was chained to the rock.

In his play *Happy Days*, Samuel Beckett portrays two characters "mired

uncomfortably in piles of sand up to their waists." They find them-

selves sinking deeper and deeper in the sand until in the end only

their heads are visible. In his play *Waiting for Godot*, Bechet uses

the same theme in another way.[14]

The many forms of "bondage" we find ourselves victimized by

is perhaps more clear than the various forms of extrication we devise

to accomplish our freedom." Cox believes "technology" has become the

deus ex machina. In technology we find our freedom.

Cox refers us to the travel section of any large newspaper.

There we find "bikini-clad" women "smiling invitingly at the poolside"

and tells us we are "loved, welcomed, nurtured--delivered from isola-

tion and frustration. The soaring jet plane tells us it is all within

our grasp."[15] We are lifted from our ordinary world of frustration

---

[13]Ibid.   [14]Ibid., p. 285.   [15]Ibid., p. 286.

and loneliness to an "extraordinary" world. This, Cox points out, is
an old theme. In a section on Shamanism in his *Primitive Mythology,*
Joseph Campbell observes that the shaman is not a victim of his trance
but commands it, as a bird the air in its flight. His drums and
dancing elevate him to ecstasy. In his ecstasy he conjures up
wondrous birds and creatures invisible to others. These creatures are
the source of his power and enable him to fly as a bird into the upper
world or descend like a reindeer, bull or bear to the world below.
The early Russian missionaries and adventurers in Siberia noted that
the shamans spoke to their "spirits" in a shrill squeaky voice not
unlike the sound of a bird. They also found numerous images of flying
geese among the tribe. In numerous paleolithic archeological sites
there have been similar discoveries. Frequently found among these
images are drawings and carvings of a human figure with the wings of
a great bird. In India, a master yogi is often addressed Paramahamsa,
which translates to "supreme wild gander." The shaman, by virtue of
his trance-induced "bird" is able to transcend this life and reality.
He flies beyond the bounds of this life, yet he is able to return at
will.[16]

Cox finds a modern analogy to this story in an Air France
advertisement in the Sunday New York *Times* (February 8, 1970). He
quotes it:

---

[16]Ibid., pp. 286-287.

> Escape Your World, Embrace Ours.
> Abandon the Ordinary. Fly with us to our exciting
> European resort-villages. Where International play. And
> total involvement is up to you.
> Join Escape Unlimited. Let yourself go. Embrace the
> unhibited. Escape to any of three private and privileged
> resort villages in the azure Mediterranean. . . . Now a
> limited number of Americans may join Escape Unlimited and
> savor the freedom of our continental Escape-Aways. . . .
> Total Involvement Is Up to You. Escape Unlimited
> involves you in everything . . . or nothing.[17]

He points out the key words in this ad are "involvement," "escape,"

"experience," "freedom," and "excitement." In the picture accompanying

the text there is a picture of a "generously endowed woman frisking in

the surf with a less clearly seen man." Cox notes the "free and easy"

spirit of the couple as well as the sexual overtones, the promise of

freedom from "intrusions," etc. Says Cox: "No revivalist hymn ever

promised more. Sweet Beulah Land!"[18]

If only the promises were true. After all our clamoring for

freedom we find we are still ourselves, lonely and unfree. Our

automobiles, the symbol of mobility, freedom, community, etc. now

"turn on us." Behold the slaughter on the highways--the stench in the

air--the everlasting monthly payments--the long waits to buy gas to

appease its voracious appetite.

> The sickness is within. It is our inability, derived from
> our compulsive acquisitiveness and consequent fear of others,
> to fashion a more human form of community. No big bird can
> save us from that.[19]

"The last enemy," St. Paul says, "is death" (I Corinthians

15:26). In medieval times the fear of dying and punishment after death

---

[17]Ibid., p. 288.   [18]Ibid.   [19]Ibid., p. 289.

was different than our fears today. Today we fear the total estrangement of death more than fear of "physical pain." Our medicine has taken the pain away and we no longer believe in the "fires of Hell." When we speak of dying the fear we express is we "lose contact with our loved ones and the fear of facing 'the unknown.'"

The science of Cryonics promises to alleviate our fears.[20] Cox notices that the journal of the movement was called *Cryonics Reports* until 1970 when it was renamed simply *Immortality*. Now people faced with death, whether from old age or illness, can be frozen (for a fee, of course) and maintained in "cryonic suspension" until a new cure or "fountain of youth" is discovered at which point the "white-coated Gabriel" will deliver the body from the icy finger of death.

Already in the design stage are plans for cryogenic storage facility on the moon which "would accommodate 1,437,969 patients."

> It would be hard to imagine a more striking example of the contemporary reappearance of ancient symbols than the plan to store the frozen dead on the moon until they can be brought back to life. Since time immemorial people have seen the moon both as the land of the dead and the sign that death is only a temporary state. Moon gods are frequently 'chthonian' (funereal deities as well). In the Hindu tradition recounted in one of the Upanishads the dead travel to the moon to await reincarnation, but since reincarnation is not ultimately desirable, the highest and most virtuous souls fly beyond the moon, where there is no more becoming.[21]

Modern residue of ancient traditions similar to this are carried over into many of our popular superstitions and stories--for instance the stories relating witches, bats, vampires, and so on, to the full moon.

---

[20]Ibid., pp. 289ff.   [21]Ibid., p. 290.

Cox warns against laughing off these "cryonic" people. They are not merely reviving old myths, they are saying that there is a technical solution to the problem of man's finitude. It is interesting that finally technology has formally assumed the role previously only attributed to God.

Another interesting point for Cox is the specifically "western" approach. While the cryonics people crave to "come back" to this world, people in other societies see this as the least desirable thing to do. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is specifically written to help the dead resist reincarnation.

Cox observes that if the cryonics movement catches on and grows to be a "widely practiced art" the "rituals and symbolic over-tones attached to its equipment, practitioners, and procedures will be fascination to watch."[22]

C. ICONOLOGY AND MYTH

The many "cultic rituals" we encounter in our daily lives are numerous and *very* persuasive. Likewise are the "myths" we encounter. We are continually "corrected" as to man's "place" in the world and as to the "purpose" and "scheme" of things. A prime example is to be found at the favorite of American's playgrounds: Disneyland. "No wonder Khruschev wanted to see it," writes Cox.[23] Over sixty million people have visited Disneyland. Disneyland is the place where our

---

[22]Ibid., p. 292. [23]Ibid., p. 293.

fondest memories, our mass-media fantasies and our timid hopes for the future are all mythically recreated and re-enacted. It is a consumer Oberammergau, a permanent tribal dance marathon for middle America.

According to Disneyland mythology we learn our history, our fantasy, and our future. In Frontierland we watch as the murdering savages attack the helplessly outnumbered settlers, we take a lazy ride down the Mississippi on a "real" riverboat, we watch those happy-go-lucky black jazz minstrels "whomp out Dixieland jazz on the street corner," or eat a (mass produced) dinner amidst the twinkle of electric "fireflies" in the "bayou." We can take a fascinating ride in which we will see the fabled pirates at their rebellious best (worst?). We can't be too critical, though. We might not see the truth but who is interested in that—we see what we want to see. It is America's image of "the olden days"—a continuation of the "westerns," the pirate movies, etc.

In Fantasyland we find our wildest fantasies come true! We whirl in tea-cups, talk to Mickey Mouse, climb a man-made Matterhorn in a bobsled or a gondola, take a tour around the world to meet "our brothers and sisters from all over the world" (never mind if they don't look like the pictures we see in the newspapers!), etc.

In Tomorrowland we see our future. The "Corporations" show us what they have in mind for us. We are reduced in size in Monsanto's magic microscope. General Electric proudly reveals the latest "dream kitchen."

You can buy at any souvenir stand in Disneyland a music box
which, when opened, plays 'Someday my Prince Will Come.' But
this is as close as Uncle Walt's eden ever comes to eschatology.
For Monsanto there is of course no tomorrow. There is only a
flashier and more efficient today. Those who hold the reins of
power in any society can hardly be expected to envision a future
that is very different from the present. They rather like the
present. Maybe that's why when Jesus talked about the Kingdom
of God he always said that only the poor would know what he
meant.[24]

Disneyland offers not reality or truth but lies. The story

Disneyland tells us is not limited to what we see and hear within its

fence and gate. Cox points out:

Its aura hangs over all of Southern California and over our
entire Monsanto-Mickey Mouse country. We *are* a people who
cannot accept the real story of our past, especially of what
we have done to red and black, and who therefore *must* tell
ourselves the myth of the Good Sheriff and elect him if pos-
sible to govern our state (as Californians have) [sic].[25]

The "image of man" has undergone change since the advent of

the "mechanical age." Man has been replaced by machine in many fields

of man's activities. The syndrome of this is found in the assembly

line which is a relatively late invention. The roots go back several

centuries however. During Descartes time (1596-1650), for instance,

there was a "lively interest" in comparing men with machine and in

making life-sized mechanical replicas of people.[26] Since then man has

alternately been seen as machine and machines seen as men.

The comparison of the universe with a "clock" which God made,

wound, and left to its own devices began with the seventeenth and

eighteenth century deists. A clear example of "machine-as-society"

---

[24]Ibid., pp. 294-295.　　[25]Ibid., pp. 295-296.　　[26]Ibid., p. 296.

is found in the movie classic *"Modern Times"* made by Charlie Chaplin in 1936. This movie presents a factory worker who is finally driven insane by the endless monotony of one job. The machine finally draws its "helpless victim" into its maw.

There are other current movies and literature depicting man turned into machine or vice-versa. Some examples are: *"2001,"* *"The Forbin Project,"* *"Westworld,"* etc. In these insightful presentations machines continually represent our deepest hopes and fears. "They deliver us from danger, threaten to destroy us, steal our souls, trick us into serving them, bewilder and enrage us."[27]

D. ICONOLOGY AND MASS MEDIA

It would seem that religious movements tend to inaugurate new and improved communication techniques and technology. The purpose here is not to study the history of this phenomenon, however it is interesting to note that in the very early years of Christianity books bound page by page (as we know them) replaced scrolls. The early Christian writers took advantage of this development because it very much simplified and reduced the cost of reproducing the text so necessary for evangelism. About the time of the Reformers the printing press came along and was very much used to publish their commentaries, theological statements, and translations (Johann Gutenberg invented the "movable type" press in the fifteenth century--the Gutenberg Bible,

---

[27]Ibid., p. 299.

printed in 1456, was the first Bible printed by movable type).[28] The

mass media as we know it (television, radio, etc.) is a product of

the "Age of Technology." Just as the Romans must have asked, "What

are these crazy Christians writing in those books?" we must ask what

is the message of the Technocrat? How is it mediated to the people

and what is the message of its symbolic imagery? How are those "myths

and rituals" discussed in the last section mediated to the people and

what are the implications?

There seems to be a general attitude that people can "take-

or-leave" what they want from the media. According to this attitude

the power of the media is restricted by our own tastes.

In light of this belief we must look at the events associated

with the assassination of President Kennedy. Marshall McLuhan

observes:

> Perhaps it was the Kennedy funeral that most strongly impressed
> the audience with the power of T.V. to invest an occasion with
> the character of corporate participation. No national event
> except sports has ever had such coverage or such an audience.
> It revealed the unrivaled power of T.V. to achieve the involve-
> ment of the audience in a complex *process*. The funeral as a
> corporate process caused even the image of sport to pale and
> dwindle into puny proportions. The Kennedy funeral, in short,
> manifested the power of T.V. to involve an entire population in
> a ritual process. By comparison, press, movie and even radio
> are mere packaging devices for consumers.[29]

Virtually the whole world was a captive audience to the television

coverage of this event. At no other time in history were so many

---

[28]Funk and Wagnalls, *Standard College Dictionary* (New York:
Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), p. 599.

[29]Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-
Hill, 1964), p. 337.

people caught up in one single activity. The power of this is
phenomenal. People who ordinarily would have carried on as usual,
albeit saddened and grieved by the loss, were held captivated involved
in the emotion and the drama (the events connected with Lee Harvey
Oswald) of the event.

In another illustration of the power of T.V. McLuhan observes
the Jack Paar show for March 8, 1963, in which Richard Nixon was the
featured guest. Up until this time Nixon had the image of being a
"slick, glib, legal" politician. He had been beaten in several
elections including the Kennedy-Nixon election in 1960. Bruce Mazlish
comments in his book *In Search of Nixon: A Psychohistorical Inquiry*
that the gubernatorial defeat of 1962 was the nadir for Nixon.[30] He
couldn't even be elected in his home state. On March 8, 1963, the
process of "changing the image" of Nixon began.

> On the Jack Paar show for March 8, 1963, Richard Nixon was
> Paared down and remade into a suitable T.V. image. It turns
> out that Mr. Nixon is both a pianist and a composer. With sure
> tact for the character of the T.V. medium, Jack Paar brought
> out this 'pianoforte' side of Mr. Nixon, with excellent effect.
> Instead of the slick, glib, legal Nixon, we saw the doggedly
> creative and modest performer. A few timely touches like this
> would have quite altered the result of the Kennedy-Nixon cam-
> paign. T.V. is a medium that rejects the sharp personality and
> favors the presentation of processes rather than of products.[31]

In regards to the 1960 election McLuhan observes:

---

[30]Bruce Mazlish, *In Search of Nixon* (Baltimore: Penguin
Books, 1973), p. 125.

[31]McLuhan, p. 309.

In the Kennedy-Nixon debates, those who heard them on radio received an overwhelming idea of Nixon's superiority. It was Nixon's fate to provide a sharp, high definition image and action for the cool T.V. medium that translated that sharp image into the impression of a phony.[32]

Television a "cool medium"--what does this mean? Cox believes one of the most unsettling issues about T.V. is proclivity to trivialize issues. Very rarely are divisive issues televised.

The media, designed to reach the broadest possible audience, thus discourage consumers from having strong feelings about anything important. It is crucial to keep the political significance of trivialization in mind, since banality seems non-political. The fact is that whenever real issues can be trivialized, the status quo is strengthened.[33]

Thus television, as a cool medium cannot, except in rare cases, be on the cutting edge of anything. It produces only that which is non-controversial and creates people and ideas that are acceptable because they do not insult the consumer's opinions. They don't even deal with those issues which the consumer might have feelings or opinions about.

The current world food shortage sharpens this point. On the news almost every night and in occasional documentaries we see the bloated bodies and drawn faces of those unfortunate people "of another part of the world" who have no food. They starve to death by the thousands. This is not a controversial issue. Everyone knows that people starve to death every day. We've known this for a long time. The controversy comes when we get down to "What do we do about it?" It is interesting to note that the program put together by students

---

[32]Ibid., p. 299.   [33]Cox, p. 304.

and faculty of the School of Theology at Claremont concerning the real issues of starvation was aired not on a network but on a small cable station that *very* few people watch and that even fewer people watch at the time of this particular broadcast. The "technical quality" of such production is not what keeps them off the network--it is the controversy. If the networks thought the consumers would "buy it" they would produce technically perfect programs that dealt with the issue.

It is on this point that the networks defend themselves against criticism. They say rather than blame the media we should blame the consumer society who demands the low controversy type programming. The mass-media only "fills a vacuum created by much larger enemies of the spirit--capitalism perhaps, or bureaucracy or industrialization."[34] In other words, they are saying that man is every day faced with the "harsh cruel world" and that when he comes home deserves and wants to not be confronted with these harsh controversial issues about, (for instance), how he is going to have to change and give up some of his eating habits to solve the food shortage. They say that he wouldn't watch this type programming anyway and rather than being creative any such programming would simply be wasted--"consumer" would turn the channel.

There is a valid point here. However, it should be pointed out that this excuse is in direct conflict with the very presupposition of advertising theory, which sustains the network's existence. To the

---

[34]Ibid., p. 305.

business men the media sells the idea that they can create desire for their products in their advertisements. They can and obviously *do* *create*. The networks spend countless dollars making surveys to find out what type of "ad" has the best effect. Not only is T.V. creative --they are past masters in creativity. They survey their market to improve their effectiveness.

Thus the media has a dual claim. On the one hand they are suppliers of what the public wants. On the other hand they create the desire for what the public wants. The mass media does "produce and distribute to the altering or preserving of social forms."[35]

The one-way line of communication is another aspect to consider. The reason T.V. is only one-way is not technical. Both the technology and the hardware are available to make T.V. two-way. Instead of a monologue there would be dialogue with two-way T.V. However, dialogue is dangerous. To enter into dialogue is to risk exposure, presecution and ridicule. When Jesus began his ministry he entered into dialogue with the people in the synagogue concerning the message of the Prophet Isaiah. He almost got thrown over a cliff for his presumptuousness of entering into dialogue.[36] Throughout the Bible dialogue is seen as an essential element of man's humanity. "The Creator makes man a responding creature and constantly calls him to respond to the Creator and to his fellow man, hopefully in love, but always in freedom."[37] Cox observes that one-way communication is actually an obstacle to

---

[35]Ibid., p. 306.   [36]Ibid., p. 309.   [37]Ibid., p. 308.

true communication. One-way communication is a means of "social control, propaganda and coerced persuasion."[38]

E. SUMMARY

Both advertising and regular programming on T.V. reflect the "American Image." Earlier it was noted how advertisements perform our defilement-purification rituals. In popular programming we find our various myth and bondage-extrication rituals. On any given program we can learn how to dress and act (in short, how to BE) depending on whether we choose to emulate Columbo or Marcus Welby, M.D. We have any number of models to choose from. And as Piaget has demonstrated, we learn by modeling.[39] It doesn't really matter which model we choose. They all are like Prometheus--all things to all men. But let us dare not object! Indeed the industry is designed to prevent it. We must remain passive and take what the media will give us. Our lot is to pay homage to the gods. The object of it all is consumerism!

---

[38]Ibid., p. 309.

[39]Herbert Ginsburg and Sylvia Opper, *Piaget's Theory of Intellectual Development* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 66 and elsewhere.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

There are many who believe the church to be obsolete and irrelevant to modern humanity. This is reflected in the declining membership of many mainline denominations. A fundamental question raised by this decline in interest and membership is, Is God dead? Does the basic symbol of the Christian faith have any relevance in modern Western culture?

According to Gabriel Vahanian, the answer is that God is dead if by God we refer to the biblical view of a wholly transcendent Creator of man and creation. The Christian faith is based on a radical monotheism, whereas modern culture is based on a radical immanentism. Modern humanity is characterized as concentrated on investigation and manipulation of the world and himself. Reality is seen as only that which is temporal and finite. On the other hand, for man to become the creator and master of the universe, his finitude must be ignored. Man is seen as essentially good and this world of time and space is seen as man's workshop of perfection. Biblical eschatology is denied.

The response of the church to this problem is often contradictory. On the one hand, the conservative churches characteristically revert to traditional pre-scientific understandings of doctrine, cult, and life. They make a sharp distinction between the natural and

supernatural. God is seen as a supernatural being who creates and controls all natural phenomena. However this conceptualization conceives of God as only an extension of the finite, even if God is the Supreme Being. Thus, it stands in direct contradiction to modern scientific understanding while still failing to provide an adequate concept of God's transcendence.

On the other hand, the liberal approach to this problem is characteristically to re-interpret religious symbols and messages to accommodate the modern situation. Religion is only functional if it meets the needs of the hour. The spiritual aspect of religion is lost to rationalization.

Both the style of the conservative and that of the liberal reduce God to finite conceptualizations and identify Him with finite causes. Religion is made to serve functions either by compartmentalization or by accommodation. According to Tillich, this is not acceptable because religion is seen not as a special function of man's spiritual life, but it is the dimension of depth in all functions. Finite ultimate concerns deny the possibility of man finding ultimate meaning, substance, judgement, and creative courage. Man becomes lost in his finitude and finite concerns. In radical monotheism ultimate concern transcends finite objects and concerns. The center of valuation is the center of Being itself. Thus ultimate concern in this infinite center of Being is a centered act of the personality toward the ultimate ground of being. God is both the object and the subject of faith. In an idolatrous faith the finite center of value

remains an object of adoration for the faithful subject. Faith, as the centered act of personality, has as its centering point that which is on the periphery of the center of being. As such it leads to a loss of the center and a disruption of the personality. Idolatry is the self-destructive faith in finite centers of valuation which therefore denies the personality of the depth of existence.

One form of idolatry is henotheism. In henotheism a nation, a family, a tribe, a social movement or even humanity itself may be the center of valuation. Chapter II is concerned with a study of the henotheistic nature of American civil religion. Early in American history a utilitarian concept of God started development. In this concept God is seen as actively interested and involved in the history of America. America is seen as the new Israel and the American individual and spirit as the Biblical Man (Adam and Christ). Society and the social and political institutions are seen as products of man's externalization. In other words they are products of collective human activity. This created world with its institutions and roles are internalized in socialization and become a constituent part of the subjective consciousness of the individual. The individual gains meaning and comfort in that society only to the extent that he internalizes the objective meanings of that society. Alienation is the situation in which the individual forgets his role in the creation, or externalization, of society. Alienation is a false consciousness because man, even alienated man, continues to participate in the co-production of society. However, the development of identity always

involves alienation. Man is by nature an alienated being. Alienation is absolutely distinguished from anomy. Whereas man's finite structures of society are constantly threatened with disintegration into the chaos of meaninglessness (anomy), the apprehension of the society in alienated terms maintains the structures of that society precisely because it strengthens that society in its struggle against meaninglessness. The various institutions, including religion, legitimate alienation by providing defense against meaninglessness. However de-alienation can be legitimated instead. This is done when the various institutions themselves are relativized as only finite human works. The individual is de-alienated because he learns his identity from his essential being. In theological language he is "saved."

An alternative to henotheism is polytheism. Polytheism is characterized by having multiple centers of valuation. The polytheistic individual looks simply and uncritically from one devotion to the next, with no seriousness about any of them. It is a flight from one source of momentary meaning and enjoyment to another. Consumerism and enjoyment of the good life is an example of a polytheistic faith. The concern in Chapter IV is wealth and consumerism. However, there is a special interest in the role of the media in sustaining idolatry. So Chapter IV is also concerned with the role of the mass media. As preparation for the treatment of the media, Chapter III is concerned with an investigation of signs and symbols. This provided us with the theological tools with which to interpret the function of the media in modern idolatry.

Signs and symbols are alike in that they both point beyond themselves to something else. They are different in that the symbol participates in the meaning or reality of that which it points. Symbols open up levels of reality that otherwise cannot be grasped. Religious symbols open up the depth dimension of reality itself. They are symbols of ultimate concern. There are two levels of religious symbol, the transcendent and the immanent level. We can use only symbols to refer to God. The immanent level is the level of the appearance of the divine in time and space—the incarnations of the divine. A religious symbol is "true" only as long as it expresses the divine-human encounter. A symbol expresses ultimate truth only if it is a symbol of the Infinite.

Consumerism is characterized by the various "monuments" of adoration, such as machines, airplanes, rockets, and other idolatrous "images." The society places its hopes, fears, and faith in such idols. Because visual perception precedes cognitive thought the various rituals and myths concerning these idols are always highly visual and oriented to ocular perception.

A ritual is a dynamic symbol. It symbolizes movement from one state to another. Two main types of ritual are the defilement-purification ritual and the bondage-extrication ritual. There are many examples of these rituals in our consumer society. Myth is the second main class of religious symbol. The function of myth is threefold. They tell us who we are, what our heritage and tradition is. They also relate our fantasies. Thirdly, they tell us our

future, our destiny.

The mass media has a dual claim. On the one hand they are suppliers of what the public wants. They serve man's hopes, wishes, and dreams. On the other hand, they create the desire for what the public wants. They create desire in advertisements as well as in regular programming. The mass media in America is one-way. It denies dispute or argument. As such it is a means of social control and manipulation and a very effective medium of idolatrous communication.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bellab, Robert N. *Beyond Belief*. New York: Harper & Row, 1970.

Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy*. New York: Doubleday, 1967.

Brown, D. Mackenzie. *Ultimate Concern*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965.

Cobb, John B., Jr. *The Structure of Christian Existence*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967.

Cox, Harvey. *God's Revolution and Man's Responsibility*. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1965.

_____. *Feast of Fools*. New York: Harper & Row, 1969.

_____. *The Seduction of the Spirit*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973.

Ginsburg, Herbert, and Sylvia Opper. *Piaget's Theory of Intellectual Development*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969.

Gustafson, James M. and others. *Moral Education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970.

Hägglund, Bengt. *History of Theology*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1968.

Halverson, Marvin (ed.) *A Handbook of Christian Theology*. New York: Meridian Books, 1958.

Hamilton, Kenneth. *The System and the Gospel*. New York: Macmillan, 1963.

Kelley, Dean M. *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.

McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.

Macquarrie, John. *Principles of Christian Theology*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966.

Mazlish, Bruce. *In Search of Nixon*. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973.

Menninger, Karl. *Whatever Became of Sin?* New York: Hawthorne Books, 1973.

Niebuhr, H. Richard. *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943.

Raths, Louis E., Merrill Harmin, and Sidney B. Simon. *Values and Teaching*. Columbus: Merrill Publishing, 1966.

Tillich, Paul. *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality.*
    Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955.

_____. *Dynamics of Faith.* New York: Harper & Row, 1957.

_____. *Love, Power, and Justice.* London: Oxford University
    Press, 1954.

_____. *The Protestant Era.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
    1948.

_____. *Systematic Theology.* 3 vols. Chicago: University of
    Chicago Press, 1957.

_____. *Theology of Culture.* London: Oxford University Press,
    1959.

Vahanian, Gabriel. *The Death of God.* New York: Braziller, 1961.

_____. *No Other God.* New York: Braziller, 1966.